Blue Ribbon Fiction

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The Washington Herald

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Blue Ribbon Features

MARY PICKFORD TELLS OWN STORY OF RISE TO FORTUNE

Noted American Screen Star Gives Record of Career from The Days of Her Childhood.

Story Starts With Death of Father, Leaving Family Poor, and Little Girl's Efforts to Help Mother Support Other Children.

Mary's story begins with the days of her mother's widowhood.

"Muvver," Mary had asked, "what are we going to do without daddie?"

It was a problem the widow had not yet given thought to. Until now few problems worthy the name had come within the experience of Mrs. Charlotte Smith—daughter of a well-to-do Irish family in Toronto, Hennessy by name, and object of a dozen suitors' affections in her recent school days.

What, indeed, were they to do without their daddy?

Mary Gladys Smith—even then, aged 5—would be a tower of strength for her mother. Not only was Mary Gladys wise beyond her years. Of vastly greater importance, she was intensely practical and helpful and fertile in a creatively imaginative way.

Whatever happened, however black the future, the mother knew that Mary Gladys would be a cheerful, helping co-worker. It was well that this was so. For the other two children—Lottie only 3 and Jack just learning to walk—meant only constant care and trouble, and would mean nothing else for a long time to come.

The father had been an ambitious young Englishman purser on a steamship plying between Toronto and Buffalo. An amateur athlete of no mean ability and overflowing with good health and spirits, he refused to treat seriously the accident which finally resulted in his death until it was too late.

Homeward bound across Lake Ontario he had been fooling about with some of his brother officers, high jumping on deck. As he cleared the obstacle his head struck against an unnoticed overhanging spar. The force of the blow knocked him out for a few minutes.

On his arrival at home he still had a dull pain in his head, but dismissed it laughingly as of no consequence. And so several days passed—and each day the pain grew worse. Reluctantly he agreed to an examination by the family physician. The medical man promptly and gravely over-rode his insistence that he rejoin his ship and resume his duties as purser on the Buffalo-bound voyage.

In the end the frantic wife, suddenly shocked into a realization of the truth, gathered eminent brain specialists at the bedside of the dying man. But it was too late for human science to avail anything. It was too late even for an examination.

With the death of her father, Mary takes up her own story.

MARY'S OWN STORY.

(Copyright, 1921.)

WE WERE poor, of course, but not so poor as one writer made it appear. Mother did do sewing for money and she did take in roomers—but she never ran a boarding house! And that's what this writer said.

But it isn't true. We never had boarders.

I'll admit I can't see much difference between roomers and boarders, but when that article appeared I know it made mother very angry and upset. And, I suppose there is a difference, when you come to think about it.

In any event, the truth is that we did not ever, at any time, take in boarders.

One of our roomers knew the manager of the local stock company. He had taken a fancy to me, and had encouraged me to recite my pieces for him. One day he went to my mother and told her he was sure his friend, the manager, would give me a job in the theatre, if my mother didn't object.

Thank heaven for my mother's good common sense at just that moment! Not that I haven't thanked heaven many times since for that same common sense with which she is abundantly gifted—but I'm especially thankful that it showed itself right then. I suppose most mothers, even in these much more enlightened days and in cities less provincial than Toronto, would object strenuously to the idea of their 5-year-old daughter's going on the stage.

The Stage As I Found It.

I was in the world of the theater say a word right here and now. And I speak from experience.

There are many worse places than the stage and many worse environments than actor folk create.

I was in the world of the theatre for 10 solid years. In that time I played many parts in many companies under the worst possible kind of conditions. But in all that time I never heard a word spoken, never saw an act committed, never was conscious of an unspoken thought—that would have been out of place in the best home on earth.

To the stage I owe much of my inherent faith in human nature. To the men and women who were so unfailingly kind and considerate—even to those men who were chronically profane (but who forebore to swear in my hearing) and to those women who, to make easier the pain of realization of quasi-failure, had turned to smoking and drinking (but who never smoked nor drank in my presence)—to these gentle actor folk I am and ever shall be grateful.

For they all, without prearrangement, without perhaps conscious intention, conspired together in a common purpose to make my girlhood as clean and good and optimistic as a girl's can be. Wherever they are at this moment—God bless them all!

A Visit to the Manager.

Mother took me to the manager herself. He was kind to me, and promised to give me a chance the very first time he put on a play that called for a child actress. Of course I was exquisitely thrilled at the idea of going on the stage.

With other children of my own age I had "acted"—in neighbors' garrets with bent pins the admission fee.

Of course! What child hasn't!

But I had loved it more than much. Although, so far as we have ever been able to discover, there never was an actor before in any branch of our family—it seemed as if I must have inherited from some unsuspected source a real passion for the theater. Now that a really, truly manager had promised I should play in a really, truly play—I was on air!

That first performance stands out indelibly in my mind even now. It was the most wonderful thing I ever went through. I am sure nothing again will ever equal the joy that was mine that night. I wasn't a bit afraid. I loved it.

It was fairyland taken bodily out of fairy books and made real to me—for me to enter and leave, to live to tire in a while, and then return to the mundane sphere—only to dream of the gorgeous mysteries that lived behind the footlights!

$15 a Week.

Not a whit less wonderful was that first salary envelope, with its crisp, new $5 bills—three of them! $15.

Almost as much as mother received from her roomers! More than she earned with her needle in the same length of time! Why it was nothing less than marvelous!

I can remember now that the wonder of it all struck me chiefly because the money was real—real money to come from a land of perpetual make-believe.

Had the salaries these players received been as unreal as the roles they played, as the gloriously happy, artificial lives they led—behind the footlights—I should have still felt that they were to be envied above all people. To share in their joyous hours, and to be paid for it in actual coin of the realm—well, it was quite too wonderful!

At first my chances came infrequently. For weeks at a time the stock company's bill would include no child's part. At such times I would be nearly disconsolate. But then would come the "call"—that beautiful, professional word that above every other means most to your actor—infinitely more than a mere summons to work, a notification that salary-drawing is to begin again.

For ten years—until I was 15—I worked in the theater. I gave to my work all the enthusiasm, all the zeal which a child in love with what it is doing will give.

Is it too much to say that in this period I learned my business, and learned it thoroughly? I wonder!

In any event I smile often when I think of the many wise gentlemen, with large tortoise shell spectacles who sigh deeply and give vent to profound regrets that motion pictures should have recruited their most successful stars from among the ranks of amateurs with no knowledge of the world of the spoken drama!

Unquestionably not a few men and women without experience in the spoken drama have reached important places in the silent drama. As the new art grows in richness and more and more proves its right to exist as a distinct and separate thing—undoubtedly there will be many new luminaries whose experience will be confined exclusively to portrayals of roles before the camera.

But for the life of me I cannot see why this should be held against the art. And now at least it is not true that motion pictures include only actors to whom the spoken drama is a sealed book.

Uptilted Scorn of Movies.

I realize the prejudice that exists against motion pictures—compared with the spoken drama. One would have to be deaf and blind not to realize it.

For ten years I, myself, looked upon the "movies" with all the uptilted-nose scorn which only ignorance can excuse.

In those days, of course, motion picture theaters were of the cheap, peep-show type. The pictures themselves were absurd crudities. But the fact remains that in those very same days I was learning—as Gladys Mary Smith—all the rudiments of acting which subsequently were to enable me to win my present position in the film world—as Mary Pickford.

The Real Me.

But it isn't I, the real I, the public cares about. It isn't to see me they pay their money at the box office. I know it isn't.

Would you like to know what really happens any night in any home in any town where a picture of mine is being shown?

Well, after supper mother tells father that she is taking the children to a picture show and asks if he would like to come along.

"What's the picture?" asks father.

"A Mary Pickford picture," mother says. "Mrs. Morrison saw it last night and says it's good."

"Not for me," says father. "Mary Pickford bores me to death—just a bunch of curls and no brains! I don't like that kind of stuff. I like a man's story with something to it."

"How can you say such awful things, daddy?" protests 10-year-old Ruth, daughter of the house. "I think Mary Pickford's 'dorable."

"Sometimes she's good," volunteers Johnny, his father's son. "Gee, I hope they got a good fight in this picture—or something!"

"Take the children, mother, and enjoy yourselves," says father, burying himself in the evening paper.

Does Not Deceive Herself.

And there it is. The next day, and for weeks to come—until another of my pictures is shown in that town—I hold no place at all in the concerns of this family. Why should I? After all, it is very wonderful, of course, to have proof come to you every day that your work is appreciated and that characterizations you have tried hard to make effective have been favorably accepted—but I should be very stupid and frightfully conceited if I took any of it seriously—any more seriously than it deserves.

It is all very well, I suppose, but it would be the rankest nonsense to take the phrase "World's Sweetheart" literally. At most it can mean nothing more than that the roles I play are naturally and necessarily the kind that evoke the largest possible measure of sympathy and affection from the audience.

But it isn't me, the real me, they sympathize with or love. It's the girl of the author's imagination, the unreal character I try my best to make seem real.

I've never played a part that even faintly resembled myself. It would be stupid of me to think of doing such a thing. It would make such a completely uninteresting characterization. That is the reason I hold firmly to the opinion that nobody in the world—outside my family and personal friends—can have the slightest interest in my real individuality. I hold this to be true in the case of every actor.

Our Private Affairs.

To be one's self on the screen or on the stage is not to act at all! Wherefore an actor who really wants to amount to anything in his profession tries always to be as different as possible—in every role he plays—from his real self.

Doing this, and in the doing establishing one's actor-self in the affections of one's audience, makes it most inadvisable to destroy all the illusions so created by deliberately showing one's self to be quite a different person in real life.

But altogether aside from the matter of good judgment, there is the matter of right to be considered.

How much right has the public to know about the personal side of the men and women who furnish their amusement? I realize perfectly that we are all servants of the public—but isn't our obligation to our public paid when we give to our work the best that's in us?

I can understand that public policy demands that the innermost secrets of a statesman's life be made public property, since the well being of a people is in the balance. But for us who at most are unimportant purveyors of entertainment for a passing hour or so—should this baring of our inner selves be necessary? I think not. Public policy does not demand it. And from the actor's standpoint, good taste rebels at the thought.

On the other hand, every tiny detail belongs to the public which has been so generous to me. There is nothing I am not ready to tell about my work—and it is a tale not too poor in detail, inasmuch as since I was 5 almost all I've known has been work. That Mary Pickford belongs to the public—and about her I am glad to tell all there is to be told.

I loved my work—everything connected with it.

I hope to be believed when I say I don't place too much importance on the fact—although there is testimony in abundance to prove it is a fact—that I made good in those early roles, pleasing critics and audiences and management alike.

The standards of acting demanded of a stock company in Toronto are not so high as to make success there cause for conceit.

But making good did have at least two valuable consequences. It helped the family purse more and more, and it gave me the self-confidence so necessary for your actor—if he is to surmount the hard periods of idleness all too frequent in this most uncertain of all the professions.

Whether because the shrewd manager decided I had acquired a following and that it was good business to have me in the cast as often as possible, or whether it was just chance, the fact remains that presently there were few bills in which there was not a part for me.

By the end of the first year I was seldom idle. But finally a chance came for Lottie and Jack, also! That made me very happy, for I had little difficulty in persuading the manager to let my sister and brother prove that acting was an inborn trait with my family!

By this time I had passed beyond that first stage of childish ingenuousness regarding the weekly pay envelope. I had discovered that acting was a profession and that the actor was an artist worthy of his hire.

The next installment of Mary's story will be found in tomorrow's Herald.

Mary Pickford puzzling over the answer to a difficult letter. She has so many letters—thousands and thousands of them—that they keep her busy dictating to her secretary in many spare minutes.

Here is a photograph of Mary having her portrait painted by Matteo Sadona, famous Italian portrait painter. When the painting is finished it will be hung in the National Galleries here.

Herald Starts Inspiring Story of Mary Pickford From Stage Girl to Star

Exclusive Autobiography of Filmdom's Most Famous Character to Appear Daily in Washington's Brightest Newspaper.

The Washington Herald starts today the remarkable story of Mary Pickford's career as told by herself. Installments of this inspiring autobiography will be found in The Herald each day until their conclusion. The story was obtained from the famous screen star by Hayden Talbot, celebrated journalist, and will be exclusive with The Herald in Washington.

By HAYDEN TALBOT.

"Miss Pickford is a real girl."

The speaker, one of the departmental heads of the vast business organization whose sole reason for being is the world-wide appeal of a slip of a girl to tens of millions of cinema patrons, was concluding his appraisal of his employer—Mary Pickford.

Unwittingly, perhaps, he epitomized the most striking characteristic of the little screen idol. For above everything else that is just what Mary Pickford is—a real girl.

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To those whose acquaintance includes actor folk will appreciate the significance of this statement by recalling the trait common to almost all mummers, a seemingly ineradicable tendency to act at all times, to live unreal roles in real life. In such as these the mark of the actor is as plain to see as the odoriferous aura enveloping the fishmonger however far moved from his market stall.

Not so Mary Pickford.

Yet, perversely enough, the little girl with the deep blue eyes and wistful, serious manner is strongly opposed to letting her world of worshippers know her as she is. As "Tess of the Storm Country," as "Pollyanna," as the pathetic heroine of "Daddy Long Legs"—as a screen artist and nothing else would Mary Pickford be known.

Often as she narrated her story to me, a faint smile overspread her features. In the twinkle in her eyes was just the suggestion of the mischievous heart of her. At these moments I glimpsed the Celt in her—the Celt that kept alive laughter in the heart of this 27-year-old girl—in spite of 22 years of the hardest kind of work.

No printer's ink in all the world can do justice to this wonder woman. To use it is as incongruous as would be the use of blacksmith's tools on a Swiss watch. The finest vellum, an old-world quill pen—these the adequate equipment—and then the grace of a Byron, the poetry of a Burns, the sentiment of a Barrie, the fitting mental qualifications for him who would limn the likeness of the girl to whom a world owes (and pays) great tribute.

The Real Woman.

She told me many things and I appreciated and understood her viewpoint. He would be a very stupid man indeed who failed to appreciate and understand anything she said. And yet—

How is one to tell the story of Mary Pickford—however scrupulously one may try to remember always that the tale must be confined to her reel, not real personality—and banish from one's mind the thousand and one warm, human, fascinating, magnificently simple qualities that go to make her the best thing given us to know—a woman?

How can I ever begin my task, restricted as she would have me restrict it to a consideration of her professional career—and hope there will be in the telling of the tale any part of the truth I know about her? And such truths! They are too inspiring and clean to be denied expression!

After Her Divorce.

I saw her one day shortly after her return to Los Angeles from the little town in Nevada where she had won her freedom from her first husband.

The local newspapers were full of the divorce, reflecting the whole world's morbid interest. Reporters by the score, in person and over the telephone, were clamoring for a statement. When she received me in the seclusion of her little bungalow I found her in the rags and dowdy make-up of the heroine of "Hop o' Me Thumb," later to be renamed "Suds."

(The world's exhibitors were impatiently awaiting completion of this "release." The play must go on. The mummer can indulge in no such luxury as a respite so long as the camera is in working order!) For all the world she seemed like some poor performing little dog, very tired and very hurt from many undeserved beatings. And so I was for sparing her that day. We could go on with the interview later. But she would not have it so.